

Voices for Living Christian Ethics



I Never Met the Man: The Relevance of T. B. Maston for Today

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T. B. Maston retired as professor of Christian Ethics at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1963 and died in 1988. His last book was published in 1985. The forty-nine men who earned their doctorates under Maston have all themselves died or reached the age of retirement. There is no longer even a doctoral degree in Christian Ethics at Southwestern. To say the least, the world has changed considerably in the past quarter of a century.

Maston's favorite phrase for Christian ethics was that it was "abidingly relevant." Is the man who, for many, embodied that Christian ethic also still relevant? What is the impact of T. B. Maston in 2011 and for the years to come?

His Name

One area in which Maston continues to impact society is the attachment of his name to prominent people, events, and positions in the world of Christian ethics. The TBMaston Foundation provides educational and financial resources in the ongoing pursuit of Christian ethics, including a T. B. Maston scholarship awarded to graduate students engaged in significant contributions to the field.

Carson-Newman College and Hardin-Simmons University each sponsors an annual lecture series named after Maston that attracts the most prominent speakers in the country to address current issues in Christian ethics. Logsdon Theological Seminary at Hardin-Simmons houses the T. B. Maston Chair of Christian Ethics and also provides a program called *The Young Maston Scholars*, which recognizes the best and brightest students at Texas Baptist schools who embody the Christian ethic.

His Legacy

Dr. Maston's first generation of students reads like a *Who's Who* of Baptist life. Men such as Jimmy Allen, Foy Valentine, William M. Pinson, Jr., James Dunn, and Weston Ware earned their degrees under Maston. His graduates served as the pastors of prominent Baptist churches, professors and administrators of seminaries, presidents of state and national conventions, and the dynamic forces of agencies such as the SBC and BGCT Christian Life Commissions and the Baptist Joint Committee.

The second generation of Maston ethicists did not study directly under Maston but studied under his students. For those at Southwestern, however, Maston's presence was a continuing influence on them as he interacted with them on a daily basis. While not technically their professor, he certainly continued as their mentor. One prominent example of this generation is William M. Tillman, Jr., who followed in Maston's footsteps as Chairman of the Christian Ethics Department at Southwestern and now occupies the T. B. Maston Chair of Christian Ethics at Logsdon Seminary.

The third generation of Maston ethicists at SWBTS knew Maston only as an elderly man. While still a presence in their lives, he no longer had the energy to physically interact with them as he had with the generations before them. In many ways, however, this generation had the benefit of learning from Maston at a point in his life when he had time to reflect on a lifetime devoted to Christian ethics. Age had given Maston perspective on the events of his life, and he shared that knowledge with the young students he now saw as the future of his field. These students carried this knowledge with them into successful careers as pastors, missionaries, and teachers, each bearing the Maston imprint.

The fourth and, I suppose, last generation of Maston ethicists never had the opportunity to meet the man. I count myself in this fourth generation, somewhat bridging the third and fourth. I hold the unique distinction of being the only person ever to graduate from Southwestern with a degree in Ethics who never met Dr. Maston. This fourth generation extends from me down to the newest Young Maston Scholars, who were not even born when Maston died. Yet, his impact on these lives and ministries is clearly discernible even today. Dr. Maston's influence is dominant in my ministry, my preaching, my involvement in organizations such as the Christian Life Commission and the Maston Foundation, and in the development of who I am as a person.

His Writings

Another area of relevance for Maston today is in his writings. Dr. Maston wrote for the general public, rather than for a scholarly audience. His works are simple, yet profound. While the issues may change by generation, the principles and methods stay consistent. Jeff Johnson, pastor of First Baptist Church in Del Rio, Texas, gives away copies of Maston's little book *Right or Wrong* on a consistent basis. Johnson believes that this simple book provides a wonderful guide to the people he deals with in learning how to make moral distinctions in their lives today, regardless of the particular issue.

Maston's *Biblical Ethics* still stands as a great resource for the study of ethics throughout the scriptures. His last book, *To Walk as He Walked*, affords a pointed look at the call of God on our lives to live as Jesus did, and provides instruction on how the life of Christ can be followed in current society, regardless of current social concerns or issues.

Conclusion

Through his name, his legacy, and his writings, T. B. Maston continues to impact Christian society as much, if not more, today than during his life. This man, who strove so diligently to describe the abiding relevance of the Gospel, is found to be abidingly relevant because of his dedication to that Gospel. Generations to come will still feel the impact of this founding father of Christian ethics. Like me, they will not meet the man, but they will be shaped by his life.